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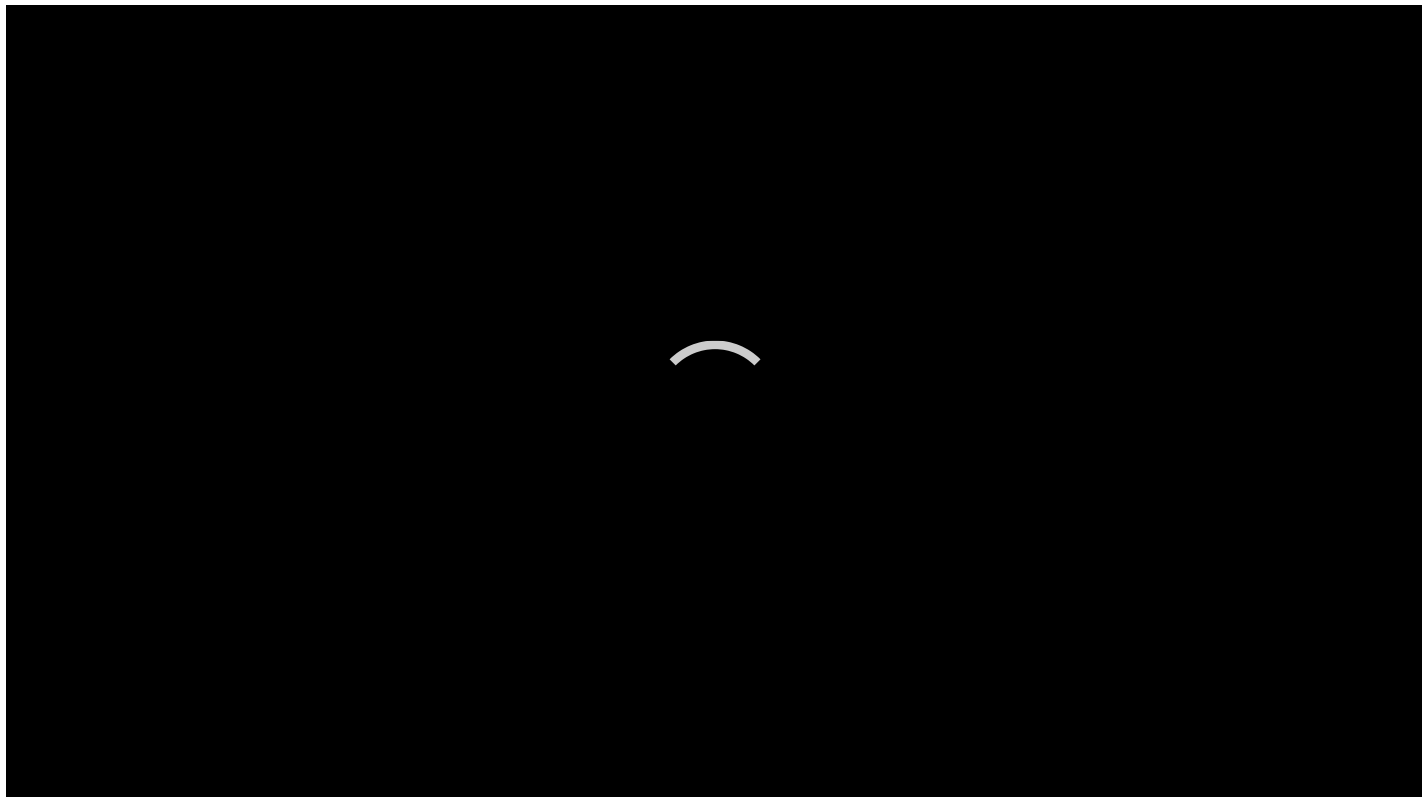
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INVESTIGATIONS

Trump allies orchestrate disinformation plot to take control of MAGA, spyware executive says



Jenna Ellis pleads guilty in Georgia election case

Attorney and prominent conservative media figure Jenna Ellis has pleaded guilty to a felony charge over efforts to overturn Donald Trump's 2020 election loss in Georgia. (Oct. 25)

Robert Anglen and **Bruce Siwy**, Arizona Republic

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BALTIMORE — A cybersecurity operative with ties to foreign intelligence agencies said ongoing efforts to subvert the 2020 election are part of a "disinformation campaign" that goes beyond restoring former President Donald Trump to power.

The owner of New-York based [XRVision](#) said his company was among a network of cyber firms recruited by lawyers and middlemen working on Trump's behalf to attack election results across the country.

Yaacov Apelbaum said the goal never was to find and expose election fraud: Instead, it was an excuse to foment chaos around America's voting system that political operatives could exploit to wrest control of the powerful MAGA movement.

Former national security adviser Michael Flynn and former Overstock.com CEO Patrick Byrne are among the key orchestrators attempting to take over what Trump started, Apelbaum told the USA TODAY Network.

"The group, the same crowd, they plant seeds and let them germinate ... they want to destabilize faith in government," he said. "A lot of activity by Flynn and others is to take over the movement."

Apelbaum — who holds surveillance and spyware patents, has worked for governments around the globe and was among the first to [analyze data from Hunter Biden's laptop](#) — said Flynn, Byrne and others are "liquifying reality," a term rooted in counterintelligence operations.

Apelbaum has made dubious claims in the past. His familiarity with intelligence tactics and frequent collaboration with the far-right Gateway Pundit website — known for spreading false reports — raise questions about whether he's employing a disinformation campaign of his own.

Background: [Lawsuit: Cybersecurity firm was instructed to lie about 2020 Pa. voting machine hacks](#)

But Apelbaum was also the first to detail how Republican allies of Trump bankrolled voting machine breaches in four swing states.

A [federal lawsuit](#) filed by XRVision in July accused a wealthy Trump donor of funneling money through a Michigan lawyer to a network of cybersecurity firms hired to carry out the scheme.

Apelbaum's legal claims are backed by business, financial and communication records independently verified by the USA TODAY Network. Those include tens of thousands of text messages from Cyber Ninjas CEO Doug Logan, who facilitated data breaches in Georgia and Michigan and led the discredited "audit" of election results in Arizona.

XRVision was enlisted to analyze voting machine data obtained from a rural Pennsylvania county, according to the lawsuit. When the firm's employees refused to falsify evidence of fraud, the lawsuit claims, XRVision was defamed and stiffed out of \$550,000.

Apelbaum said he responded with an intelligence-gathering operation. He targeted Flynn, Byrne and other key Trump allies who planned and executed data breaches shortly after Trump's election loss in November 2020.

Apelbaum said he used cellphone and other data to establish the ties between a network of operators engaged in spreading conspiracy theories and false information about the security of elections. He said their activities overlapped in multiple states, and he connected them to operatives working in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

"I eventually put them all under surveillance," Apelbaum said. "It revealed it is a network ... always the same crowd."

As with Flynn, many involved in the data breaches and election challenges had counterintelligence or security backgrounds.

They included retired U.S. Army Col. Phil Waldron, who specialized in psychological operations; former National Security Agency employee Jim Penrose; former Army Capt. Seth Keshel; and Russel Ramsland Jr., the leader of a security firm called Allied Security Operations Group, which counts former Central Intelligence Agency, Department of Defense and Secret Service members among its operatives.

State and federal indictments against Trump and members of his inner circle — who are starting to turn on him — closely track Apelbaum's allegations about efforts to breach voting machines and overturn the 2020 election.

MAGA, the campaign slogan and promise by Trump to Make America Great Again, has evolved beyond the former president, Apelbaum said. He described it as a financial and political juggernaut for whoever can harness its power.

Neither Flynn nor Byrne could be reached for comment.

"I don't think it's about Donald Trump anymore," Apelbaum said.



A cybersecurity operative says his company was among a network of cyber firms recruited to attack election results to foment chaos around America's voting system. Political operatives then could exploit the chaos to control the powerful MAGA movement, the operative says. *Drew Angerer/Getty Images*

Plot to control MAGA: Counterintelligence or conspiracy theory?

Apelbaum talks in the language of covert operations. He uses terms associated with Russian intelligence and political warfare for the network behind the voting machine breaches.

They are part of an "active measure," he said, referencing a strategy to "create chaos ... get rid of the truth."

The Russian Federation coined the phrase "active measure" in the 1920s to describe a "combination of propaganda, political pressure, and sometimes covert military activity," according to scholarly research cited by [academic publisher IGI Global](#).

[The Kremlin still employs active measures](#) against the U.S. and other countries, according to intelligence analysts.

"You need to let go of the concept of disinformation and switch to the concept of active measure," Apelbaum said. "An active measure encompasses many elements, including disinformation. A well-crafted

active measure is living, breathing ... and it spreads. They are pieces of art."

He stopped short of saying Russia is involved in efforts by Trump allies to sow doubts in U.S. elections. But the network is well-organized and well-funded, he said, and its attacks on the electoral process pose a legitimate threat to democracy.

Apelbaum categorized those involved in the election schemes: Flynn and Byrne are orchestrators; former Trump lawyer Sidney Powell and lawyers working for her to facilitate data breaches are operators; and cybersecurity firms such as Cyber Ninjas, hired to obtain and analyze election data, are agents.

The motivations of people involved in an active measure are fluid and not everyone shares the same goal, Apelbaum said. Multiple outcomes are often planned.

Former FBI counterintelligence agent Asha Rangappa said she is skeptical of Apelbaum's claims, calling them "far-fetched."

The USA TODAY Network reached out to Rangappa, who is an assistant dean and senior lecturer at Yale University's Jackson School of Global Affairs, about Apelbaum's allegation that Trump allies are participants in an "active measure" plot.

She said the term has a specific meaning, and Apelbaum appears to use it loosely in laying out his MAGA subversion strategy.

"That's not really what I would think of as an active measure ... a state-sponsored intelligence operation by the Kremlin," Rangappa said. "The meaning of the term doesn't fit in the context of the way it is being used."

Rangappa, a lawyer, worked out of the New York division of the FBI from 2002-2005 and has taught courses on Russian intelligence and information warfare. She said active measures are usually "open-ended," whereas the scenario Apelbaum outlines appears to have a "very surgical" goal.

State and federal authorities have deeply investigated activities to overturn the 2020 election, she said, and they likely would have discovered interference by foreign intelligence agencies.

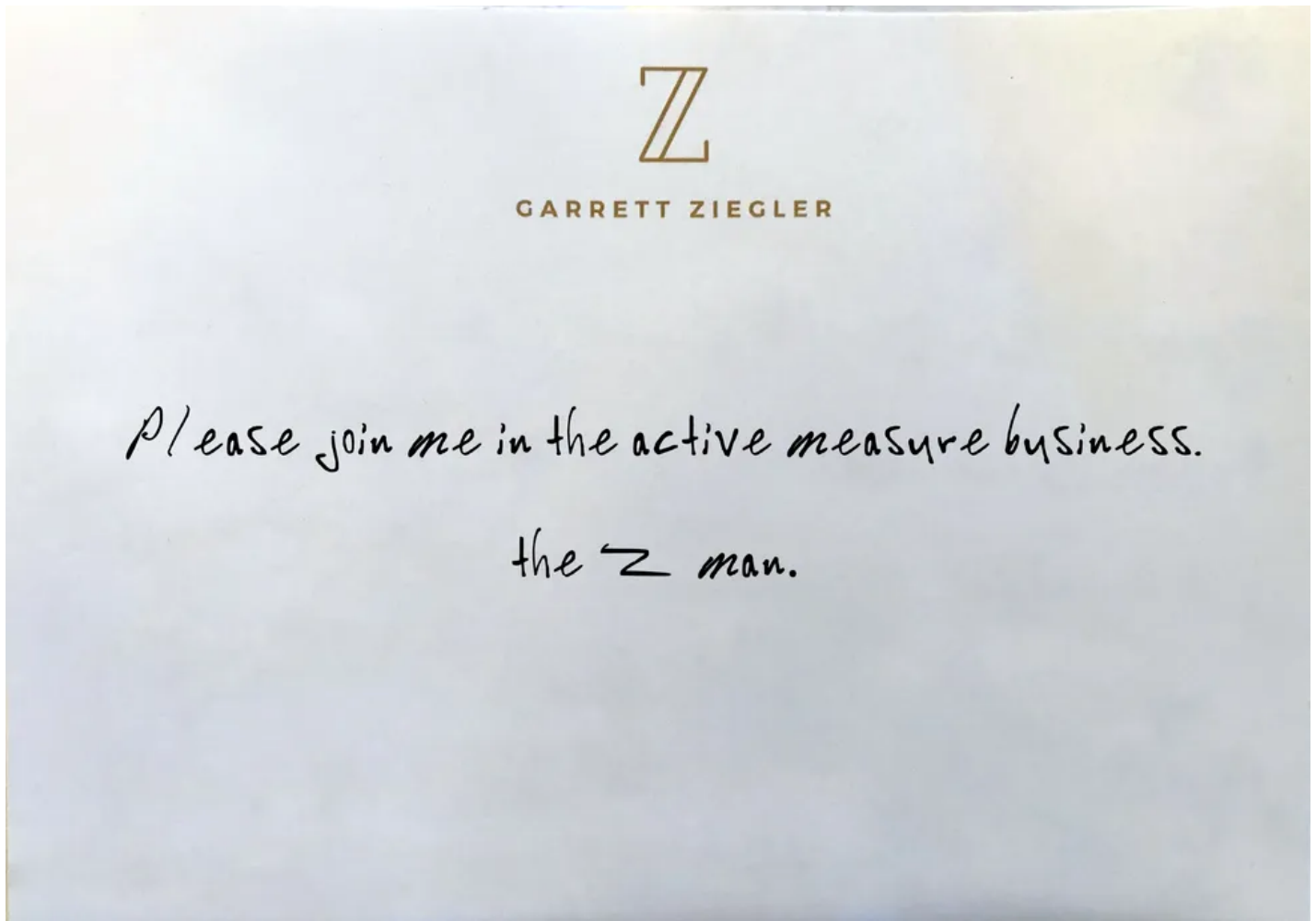
"It sounds like a conspiracy theory," Rangappa said, "and I don't want to give credence to it."

White House staffer invited 'active measure' on Hunter Biden laptop

Former Trump White House staffer Garrett Ziegler in 2021 invited Apelbaum to take part in an "active measure" campaign related to Hunter Biden's laptop, according to Apelbaum.

He provided Ziegler's correspondence to the USA TODAY Network as a specific example of the ongoing disinformation campaign.

"Please join me in the active measure business," reads a handwritten message on stationery emblazoned with a large Z and bearing the name Garrett Ziegler in gilded letters. It's signed "the Z-man."



Yaacov Apelbaum of XRVision says former White House aide Garrett Ziegler sent him this card asking him to join him in the "active measure" business. Active measure is a term used by the intelligence community for pervasive disinformation and other political activity. *Courtesy Of Yaacov Apelbaum*

Apelbaum said he took it as a recruitment offer, which he declined. He called Ziegler a "fraudster."

Ziegler's entreaty, according to Apelbaum, was connected with Hunter Biden's laptop, the contents of which have fueled speculation and lawsuits since it was left at a Delaware computer repair shop in 2019.

Ziegler said in an email Thursday he did not write the messages. Apelbaum forged them, he said.

"The message on the front of my stationary ... was written by APELBAUM himself as a troll, and he (being fundamentally mendacious) did not tell you that," Ziegler said.

Ziegler, 27, was an aide to Peter Navarro, a former Trump assistant and trade adviser. Since leaving the White House in 2021, Ziegler has reinvented himself as a conservative social media firebrand with a single overarching focus: Hunter Biden.

He's amassed a trove of personal and financial data on President Joe Biden's son that he disseminates online. Ziegler published a report through his nonprofit called Marco Polo purportedly containing damning images and information from the laptop.

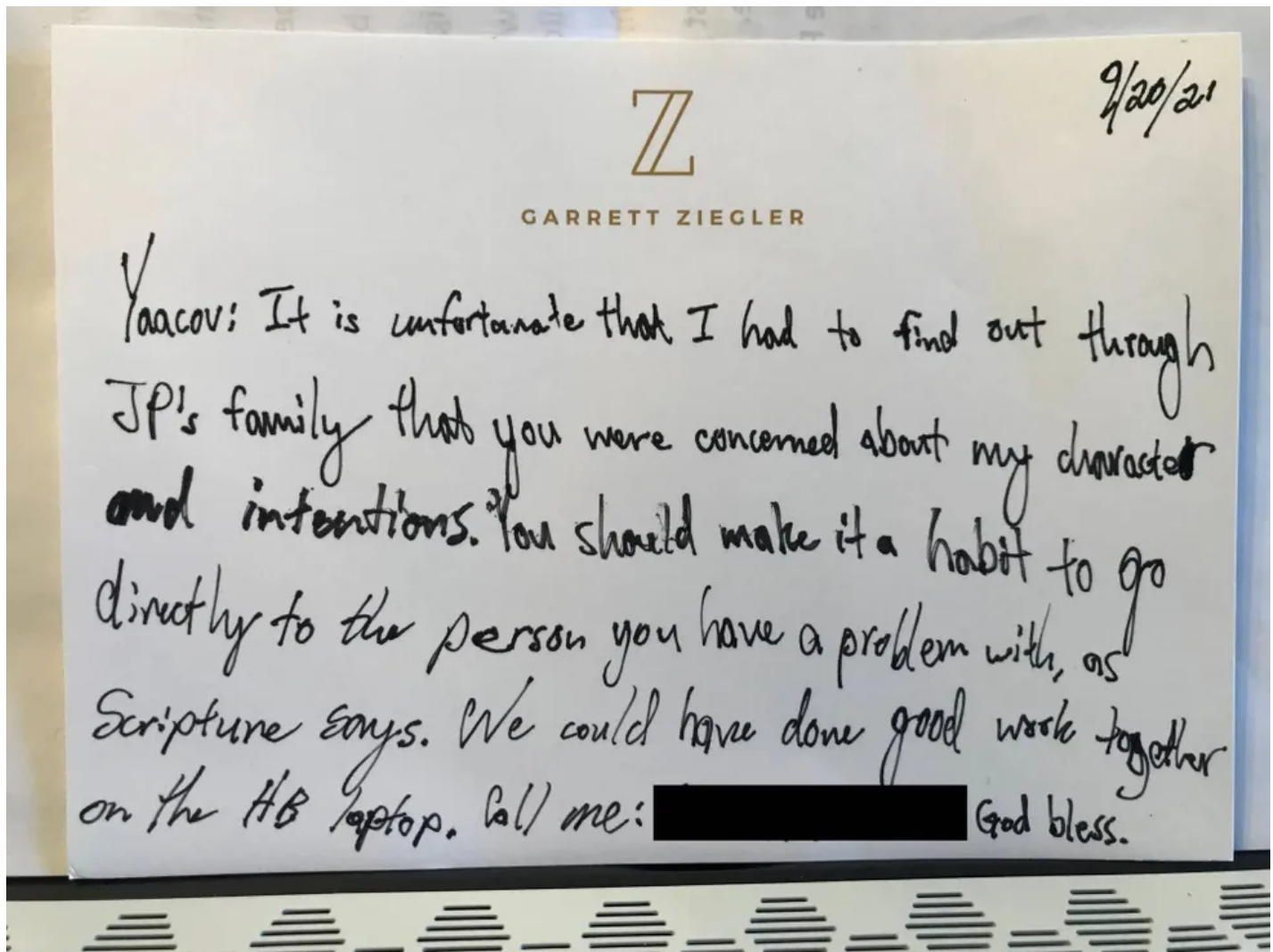
Hunter Biden sued Ziegler in September, saying he accessed the data without permission and altered its content.

Apelbaum agreed content was altered. In 2020, Delaware computer shop owner John Paul Mac Isaac hired Apelbaum to analyze the laptop's hard drive.

Apelbaum said embarrassing information is on the computer, but added Ziegler is spreading falsehoods about some explicit material on the laptop.

Ziegler initially could not be reached for comment. In his email, Ziegler said his reports on Marco Polo raise doubts about Apelbaum's conduct and background.

Documents show Ziegler sent another note on his personal stationery to Apelbaum in 2021, suggesting he was hurt Apelbaum didn't trust him, according to the documents Apelbaum provided.



XRVision owner Yaacov Apelbaum says he received this message from former White House aide Garrett Ziegler after declining to work with Ziegler on a project involving Hunter Biden's laptop. Courtesy Of Yaacov Apelbaum

"Yaacov: It's unfortunate that I had to find out through (Mac Isaac's) family that you were concerned about my character and intentions," the message reads. "You should make it a habit to go directly to the person you have a problem with, as Scripture says. We could have done good work together on the HB (Hunter Biden) laptop. Call me ... God bless."

Ziegler, in a 2021 social media post, defended the "timeline and chain of custody of the laptop for Marco Polo's academic report."

He accused Apelbaum in the post of being an Israeli or American spy — a "Mossad/CIA operative."

Apelbaum: Trump allies lured company into data breach

There's no evidence to suggest Apelbaum, 60, is a government agent. But he and his associates have worked in the spyware business for years, developing systems for monitoring and tracking people.

Who is Yaacov Apelbaum? Meet the spyware exec who exposed voting machine breach plots

XRVision was founded in Singapore in 2015. It bills itself as a specialist in artificial intelligence technology and markets facial recognition software to governments worldwide.

XRVision's lawsuit gave the public its first glimpse into how Dominion voting machine breaches in at least four swing states were orchestrated and funded.

Plea deals by three members of Trump's legal team in October buttress many of XRVision's claims about the efforts to cast doubt on voting systems.

Powell and Trump lawyers Kenneth Chesebro and Jenna Ellis admitted to a sweeping election conspiracy case in Georgia. Each agreed to testify against Trump in exchange for reduced charges.

Powell admitted she enlisted cyber specialists and local GOP officials to illegally breach voting machines to bolster claims the election was rigged. Chesebro told authorities he plotted with Trump lawyers Rudy Giuliani and John Eastman to put forward slates of GOP electors to falsely certify Trump as the winner in certain states. Ellis acknowledged peddling false voting fraud claims to state legislators.

Apelbaum said his company was brought on board by Pennsylvania businessman Bill Bachenberg, who served as co-chair of a committee to reelect Trump and who helped establish the state's alternate slate of Trump electors.

Bachenberg tapped Michigan lawyer Stefanie Lambert to serve as a go-between, setting her up with a \$1 million war chest to hire cybersecurity firms, according to XRVision's lawsuit.

"Bachenberg funded these investigations because he sought local and national fame, glory, and esteem for discovering and proving voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election," the lawsuit claims.

Apelbaum said he met Bachenberg and Lambert at a Detroit hotel in 2021. Their first target was data from voting machines in Antirim County, Michigan, which they later code-named "Project Sampson," according to the lawsuit.

Bachenberg and Lambert expanded their investigation in 2022 to include election data obtained from Dominion voting machines in Fulton County, Pennsylvania. Apelbaum said Lambert assured him she was "authorized by

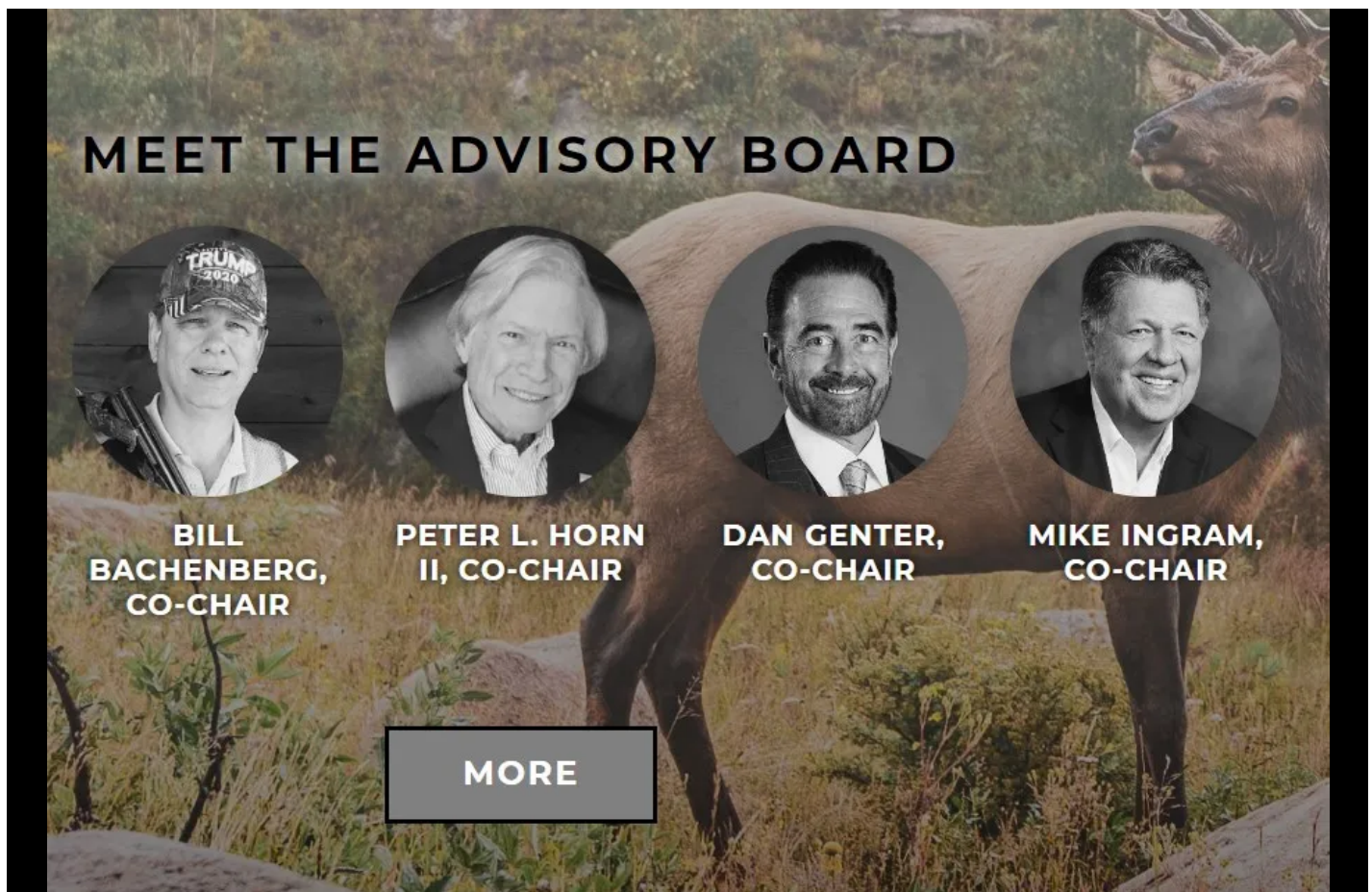
a Pennsylvania state court to conduct a forensic and cyber analysis" of the county's elections systems.

Inside Fulton County: [Pa. voting system errors 'minuscule,' judge says in tossing Fulton County civil suit](#)

It was a lie, according to the lawsuit. Apelbaum said he wouldn't have done the analysis if he had known the court hadn't approved it.

When XRVision reported Fulton County's voting machines weren't hacked or preconfigured to favor any particular candidates, the suit alleges Lambert became furious. Bachenberg refused to pay.

XRVision is seeking \$10 million in damages.



A screenshot of the former website of Sportsmen for Trump shows Allentown, Pa., resident Bill Bachenberg (left). Bachenberg is a defendant in a civil suit that alleges he financed the unauthorized inspections of 2020 voting machines in multiple states. *Via Sportsmen For Trump*

Bachenberg did not respond to multiple interview requests.

Lambert said in an email on Wednesday she had not been contacted by Apelbaum or his lawyers.

"I have received NO contact (in person, by mail, or email) from counsel for Jacob Applbaum, Yaacov "E"pplebaum, Yaacov Applebaum, or

whatever false identity he is currently using," she said in the email. "But I hope that I get served soon. My federal whistleblower is chomping at the bit to get the truth out. I know. I know all of it."

XRVision's lawyers filed a motion on Monday accusing Lambert of dodging efforts to serve her with a complaint, saying 19 attempts have been made at six locations. The firm asked a judge not to dismiss the lawsuit, [according to a report in Law 360](#).

A Michigan grand jury indicted Lambert in August on multiple charges tied to the breaches, including "undue possession" of a voting machine. She also is an unindicted co-conspirator in the Georgia case. She has pleaded not guilty and maintains both cases were politically motivated.

"There's no way Ms. Lambert did not know she was in an active measure," Apelbaum said. "I warned her ... warned them they did not have election fraud."

Pa. whistleblower Mike Ryan backs data breach claims

A former Bachenberg employee turned whistleblower confirmed Abelbaum's story on the data breaches. But he said the cybersecurity firm's owner likely played a bigger role than the XRVision lawsuit suggests.

Mike Ryan, who was interviewed twice by the FBI in April and September, said he believes Apelbaum helped Bachenberg vet the information coming in from the cybersecurity firms hired by Lambert: "He was the measuring stick."

Ryan said Apelbaum confided details of his involvement in the election plot during six July phone conversations, which lasted more than two hours in total.

Their discussions touched on meetings Apelbaum had with members of Trump's inner circle, his belief that Bachenberg and Lambert were being used as fronts, his disdain for Cyber Ninjas and other cybersecurity firms involved in the breaches, and his fear of Flynn and Byrne.

Apelbaum also repeatedly raised the specter of an active measure, Ryan said.

"He told me he met with Gen. Michael Flynn and Patrick Byrne on at least one occasion," Ryan said. "He told me the people he was scared of most were Flynn and Byrne."

Apelbaum told him Flynn and Byrne were behind the efforts to undermine the election system, Ryan said. He maintained Flynn was pulling

Lambert's strings.

Though a Georgia grand jury recommended charging Flynn, neither he nor Byrne has faced indictments related to efforts to overturn the 2020 election.

Ryan said he first became aware of XRVision's relationship with Bachenberg months before the firm was hired to work on the data breaches in 2021. He said he found documents about facial recognition on XRVision letterhead in his boss's storage area.

Apelbaum wouldn't talk about it, Ryan said.

Ryan said he began researching Apelbaum's history, digging deep into his foreign intelligence, political and business ties, which likely brought him in contact with movers and shakers in Trump's orbit. The results surprised him.

"The American people need to understand just who was involved in all of this," Ryan said.

Ryan called Apelbaum's lawsuit a form of legal or "public blackmail" — a gambit to force Bachenberg and Lambert to settle rather than risk exposing themselves in a trial.

Ryan said he came away from the phone calls with admiration for Apelbaum, whom he described as highly intelligent and deliberate.

Apelbaum described Ryan in less favorable terms.

"Mike Ryan is a grifter," Apelbaum said, adding that Ryan offered to work with him on the lawsuit against Bachenberg. "He tried to shake me down."

Ryan denied the claim, saying: "I wish I was that good. No."

Flynn, Byrne stoke far-right fires on 'ReAwaken America' tour

Flynn and Byrne continue to influence right-wing circles on a national circuit with a Christian nationalist roadshow that Flynn helped to launch in 2021.

The [ReAwaken America tour](#), where conspiracy theories and theology mix with warnings about World War III, the collapse of the dollar and the cases against Trump, are a MAGA hit featuring a who's who of TrumpWorld.

Among the dozens of luminaries: Trump's son Eric Trump; MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell; former campaign adviser Roger Stone; conspiracy theorist Jovan Pulitzer; far-right radio show host Alex Jones; Arizona state Sen. Wendy Rogers, R-Flagstaff; and U.S. Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz.

The tour's mission, according to its website, is "to uncover instances of election fraud, medical tyranny, religious manipulation, financial fraud by global corporations, political corruption and mainstream media propaganda." It has held 33 sold-out events over the past three years, with additional stops scheduled this winter in Oklahoma and California.

"Believe me," Flynn told a San Marcos, California, crowd last year, "I have organizations on the left that hunt me down. They track me all over this place. They follow me, they write about me, they videotape every move."

"We're going to continue to fight. And we're still at this, we are not going to give up."

The emergence of Flynn and Byrne as national speakers comes after marked turns in their own professional careers.

Flynn, who rose to the rank of lieutenant general in the U.S. Army, was an expert in counterterrorism strategy and intelligence assignments. He became director of the Defense Intelligence Agency via nomination from then-President Barack Obama in 2012. He went into private consulting in 2014 before serving a stint as national security adviser for the Trump White House.



Michael Flynn, former President Donald Trump's first national security adviser, interacts with members of the audience after a speech to about 200 people in Venice, Fla., on July 12, 2023. *Zac Anderson*

The adviser role was short-lived, as Flynn pleaded guilty in 2017 to making false statements to the FBI about conversations he had with a Russian ambassador. The U.S. Justice Department lauded Flynn for his cooperation, and he later was pardoned by Trump.

While Flynn moved through the decades in military and government circles, Byrne became a business icon.



Patrick Byrne told Nebraska forum attendees that China is planning to take over the U.S. by 2030. "I can promise, every nice home in the United States, there's someone in China who already has a deed to your home," he said. *Rebecca S. Gratz/Associated Press*

Byrne, a Stanford University graduate, turned Overstock.com into a retail juggernaut before resigning and selling his stake for about \$90 million as the company slumped in 2019.

He claimed that he had a relationship with Maria Butina, a Russian who served 18 months in U.S. prison before her deportation for conspiring to act as a foreign agent, and that he reported his findings to the "Men in Black," FBI and "Deep State."

Arizona's debunked "audit" of the 2020 vote was financed in part by millions of dollars from Byrne.

Apelbaum also called Flynn and Byrne fraudsters. He said their initial goal was convincing Trump to embrace, endorse and echo the election conspiracy after his 2020 loss — that the vote was rigged against him.

"Which is exactly what he did," Apelbaum said.

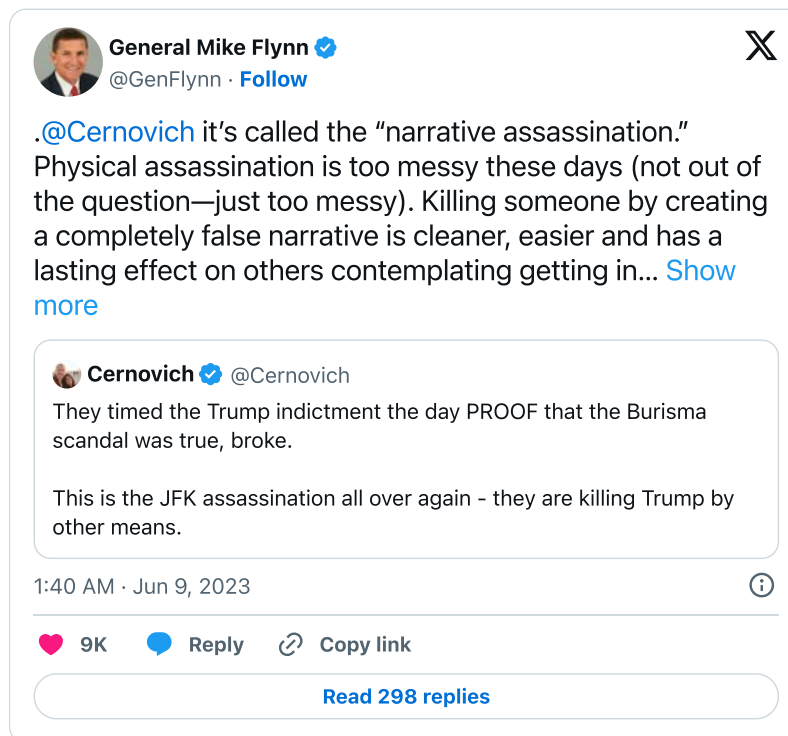
A little more than a month later, on Dec. 12, Flynn galvanized Trump supporters during a Million MAGA March outside the U.S. Supreme Court, telling them "there are paths that are still in play."

Flynn and Byrne spoke privately with Trump in the Oval Office during an infamous meeting on Dec. 18, 2020. Byrne told federal investigators it was Ziegler who helped get them into the White House after 6 p.m. on that Friday.

Once there, they urged the president to seize voting machines in an effort to stay in power, according to the House Select Committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol.

Flynn later testified before the committee and invoked his Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination when asked if the violence of the day was necessary. He invoked it again when asked if he believed in the peaceful transition of power.

When Trump was indicted on charges of unlawfully retaining federal documents in June, Flynn called it the "narrative assassination" in a tweet on X.



"Killing somebody by creating a completely false narrative is cleaner, easier and has a lasting effect on others," Flynn posted. "This is something I have a great deal of experience and expertise on."

Apelbaum said Flynn and Byrne ensnared Trump's followers in a lie and positioned themselves to achieve their operational goal.

"They want to subvert the MAGA movement," he said.

Robert Anglen is an investigative reporter for The Republic. Reach him at robert.anglen@arizonarepublic.com or 602-444-8694. Follow him on X [@robertanglen](#).

Bruce Siwy is a reporter for the USA TODAY Network's Pennsylvania state Capitol bureau. He can be reached at bsiwy@gannett.com or on X [@BruceSiwy](#).



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